



# Bologna

## Postmodernism

### Bob

## Perelman Amis

By William Eaton

If it tastes good we eat it.

A sister who points to the sky at least once a decade is a good sister.

One of the last rooms of the [Museo della Storia di Bologna](#) takes up the subject of language. I do not know why this subject occupies one of the last rooms, beyond Bologna's hidden canals and Marconi. The exhibit includes a video of two men drinking wine and speaking two dialects of the region, choosing phrases that emphasize the differences between these two dialects.

I can develop a theory as to why I spent more time watching this video than I did with the mortadella machine (broken the day I visited) or in the rooms devoted to the Catholic Church, Napoleon or the founding, in 1088, of the first university in the history of the world. My theorizing would begin with my interest in languages and with the importance of the physical act of conversation to Italians, the pleasure of speaking. Equally important was my guilt—at having passed through this

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museum at a rapid pace without engaging or being engaged. Before reaching the end, I felt obligated to stop at something.

Readers may also wish to know at some point that – 30 – has been traditionally



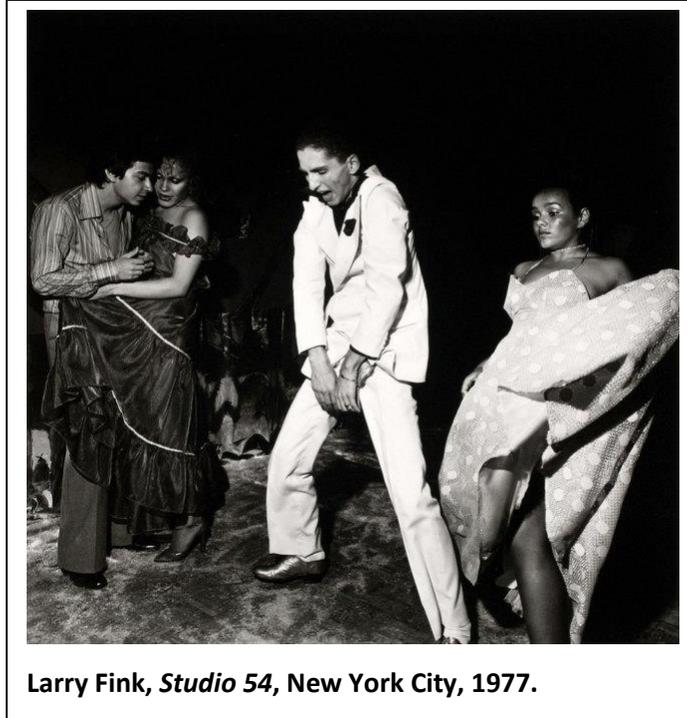
**Sostegno del Battiferro (“structure for beating iron”). First made of wood; rebuilt in masonry in 1548. Hydraulic work; allowed sea boats to reach the level of the Navile Canal and, thereby, Bologna. Bologna’s canals date back to the twelfth century and are mostly underground. They provided energy for craft work and small-scale manufacturing. Near Battiferro there have been many industrial archaeological finds, such as the remains of a rice husker and a brick kiln. See [Hidden Canals in Bologna](#).**

used by journalists to indicate the end of a story. There are many theories about how the usage came into being—e.g.: during American Civil War era, the number 30 was telegraphic shorthand to signify the end of a transmission. Also significant—not that such a word, nor “importance” seems to fit in a text such as this one; yet here they are, and I am calling it significant that I had come to the museum of the history of Bologna more or less direct from New York, having slept an hour or two on the plane, half an hour on the express train from

Milan. I had not travelled from New York to see this museum. Eager for a break from my New York routine, I had more or less put a finger on a map. And then, after arriving at my hotel near the Bologna train station, I had read in a guidebook an enthusiastic recommendation of the museum. And each room of the museum included one-page sheets describing the exhibits. The pages in English were usually missing from the racks; more often I found Italian, French, German or Spanish. And I read many of these pages—on the diagonal, as the French say (skimming).

That afternoon in the Museo della Storia di Bologna, I was happiest in the café, with a friendly waitress and one of Kingsley Amis’s comic novels: *Girl, 20*. Amis’s alter-ego was making his first visit to a Sixties discothèque in London:

“A girl  
a piece



clad in  
of silk

**Larry Fink, *Studio 54*, New York City, 1977.**

measuring at least eighteen inches from top to bottom appeared through the gloaming and gave out sheets of vellum which I took to be menus. I peered hard at mine, polished my glasses on the paper napkin provided, peered again and made out phrases . . . One day, I foresaw, eaters-out, if any, would need a more than nodding acquaintance with Braille as well as lip-reading. . . .

“Half a minute later we were on a small dance floor . . . . The majority of couples were performing at rather than with each other, making rope-climbing or gunshot-dodging motions with an air of dedication, as if all this were only by way of prelude to some vaster ordeal they must ultimately share.”

You look great in shorts. And the flag looks great too.  
Even the words floating in air make blue shadows.

I wish to tell of my travels less in Bologna than in our postmodern world. How do we go through lives in the absence of a central narrative or objective; perhaps creating meanings and values by our actions, our juxtapositions; perhaps not?

Before boarding Delta 418, I had been reading Frederic Jameson's much-travelled essay, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." Depth, he was telling me, was being "replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)." And all modern culture is characterized by "autoreferentiality . . . which tends to turn upon itself and designate its own cultural production as its content."

When I got to Il Museo della Storia di Bologna, a receptionist offered me an audio guide, free, in English. After standing several minutes in the initial space holding this thing to an ear, I gave it back. Too slow.

The woman in the gift shop got angry with me for my putting the machine back in its place in the box of audio guide machines and for trying to repossess my ID card myself. This was against the rules.



**Der Audioguide des Museums beinhaltet Führungen durch den Stadtgeschichtlichen Rundgang sowie durch die Ausstellungen "Hamburg im 20. Jahrhundert" und "Juden in Hamburg". Er steht Ihnen kostenlos an der Kasse in Deutsch und Englisch zur Verfügung. Foto: Angela Franke**

And of course the museum offered no central narrative. I have wondered, subsequently, if this is not, among other things, a way of avoiding the problem of political incorrectness—or the problems that may result from taking any position at all. If no connections or causes are asserted, or if any such are left for each viewer to assemble on his or her own, who (but perhaps "me") can be accused of anything? In "Within the Context of No Context" (1980), George W.S. Trow writes:

In the New History, nothing was judged—only counted. The power of judging was then subtracted from what it was necessary for a man to learn to do. . . . In the New History, the ideal became agreement

rather than well-judged action, so men learned to be competent only in those modes which embraced the possibility of agreement.

I often have the sense, too, that we have now arrived in the Dark Ages of capitalism. The institutions and dogma of our times so enclose us that we are not only losing a capacity to judge, but also to imagine alternatives. (In Jamesonese this becomes: “. . . a certain minimal aesthetic distance . . . the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital . . . distance in general (including ‘critical distance’ in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism.”)

We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.

But better get used to dreams.

Meanwhile, I never found out why Bologna? Why a city here? And why from a relatively long view has this particular city been so extraordinarily successful? I am prepared to say—and not only on account of the delicious *seppia* (cuttlefish) and Veneto wine that I enjoyed on the Via Broccaindosso—that Bologna is one of the most successful cities in the history of the world. Though the recent economic downturn has weighed on it, Bologna has long been very wealthy. In 1256 the commune of Bologna became perhaps the first governmental body to abolish slavery and release the serfs. The text of the law (known as *Liber Paradisus* [Heaven Book]) famously states: « Paradisum voluptatis plantavit dominus Deus omnipotens a principio, in quo posuit hominem, quem formaverat, et ipsius corpus ornavit veste candenti, sibi donans perfectissimam et perpetuam libertatem ». (In the beginning God planted a paradise of delights, where he put the man whom he had formed, and adorned his body

**How do we go through lives in the absence of a central narrative or objective; perhaps creating meanings and values by our actions, our juxtapositions; perhaps not?**

with a bright dress, giving him the most perfect and perpetual freedom.) Wikipedia also tells me that during the Renaissance Bologna was the only Italian city that allowed women to excel in any profession. “Women had much more freedom than in other Italian cities; some even had the opportunity to earn a degree at the university.”

Location, location, location—that’s my hypothesis. Geography is destiny.

In the Amis novel, *Girl, 20*, a and violinist is leaving his girl not yet 20, and yet second wife had been when the composer had become youth and had left his first central narrative, or old story, values here—fear of eternal attractiveness of others, and even of young (smartphones, etc.) helping one’s mortality. The second the new girlfriend’s apartment her. One of the girlfriend’s off all her clothes, to show attractive, more youthful become-middle-aged second . capable of loving!” the wife



**Bronze sculpture by contemporary Italian artist Vittorio Tessaro, who lives in Arcugnano about two hours north of Bologna.**

famous conductor second wife for a younger than his they first met and enthralled by her wife. (There’s a and traditional mortality, the youth; the youth of products one deny or ignore wife goes over to in order to confront responses is to strip that she has a more body than the wife. “You’re not . . yells.

“Maybe I’m not,” the girlfriend says. “You could have a point there. . . . But anyway, it doesn’t matter, that side of it, does it? Whatever I’m like he prefers me to you and that’s why he’s leaving you and going off with me, and that’s all there is to it. He wants to and I want to, so that’s what we’ll do.”

Values do not shape our actions, our actions create values, the opportunism of which may make them seem valueless.

The sun rises also. I'd rather the stars didn't describe us to each other; I'd rather we do it for ourselves.

Pick up the right things.

In an earlier draft of this piece I made much of how the exhibits at Il Museo could be compared to phosphorescent plankton. My sense of such beings is that they only give off light when they happen to collide with something, or when something, such as a human limb, happens to collide with them. Either the force or the friction leads to light. I could be wrong. I am not a marine biologist, and I am not going to Google. I do not mind being



**Interior of the meeting house at the Oblong in Quaker Hill, New York. In 1769, this Meeting became the first in the United States to free slaves as an official action. North of Quaker Hill, fugitives could count on protection from Quakers belonging to the Oswego Meeting, to the northwest. From an online history of [The Underground Railroad in the New York Hudson Valley](#).**



**The Culture Hall at Il Museo della Storia di Bologna houses 12 terracotta busts, dating back to the 17th century. They portray women who have been prominent in the city's history.**

wrong. And my point remains: our haphazard collisions can create a kind of light that rarely lasts long. (And I remember, hardly for the first time, long hours spent in Quaker meeting, alone at the far end of a bench—my chosen spot—waiting for The Light to reach me, as it were through the long, white mullioned windows, but without the least collision, force, or friction.)

[Http://www.genusbononiae.it/index.php?pag=25](http://www.genusbononiae.it/index.php?pag=25) (accessed on Veterans Day, 2015): Il “Museo della Storia di Bologna rappresenta un percorso museale dedicato alla storia, alla cultura e alle trasformazioni di Bologna, dalla Felsina etrusca fino ai nostri giorni. . . . raccontate in modo innovativo, con tecniche espositive scenografiche ed interattive . . . La splendida cornice del palazzo medievale, reinventato, . . . e il progetto grafico, . . . rendono la visita al museo un’esperienza unica.” (. . . journey dedicated to history and culture of Bologna from Etruscan times to our own . . . recounted in an innovative way using interactive, etc., technology . . . The splendid cornice of the medieval palace reinvented . . . and the layout . . . make a visit to the museum a unique experience.)

Hey guess what? What? I’ve learned how to talk. Great.  
It’s always time to leave.

## Final notes

The photograph at the very top of this piece is from the Bologna museum. [Jameson’s essay](#) was first published in *New Left Review* I/146 (July-August 1984), 53-92. Subsequently it became the first chapter of a book of the same name (Duke University Press, 1991). The line about my more or less putting “a finger on a map” is not true. In fact I have long wanted to visit Bologna’s [Museo Morandi](#), which has been closed for renovations. During this time, that museum’s Morandi collection has been on view at [MAMbo](#)— Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna.

The lines introducing each section have been chosen, not quite at random, from [“China” by Bob Perelman](#), first published in *Soup #2* (1981). Like many another



**“This photo is reported to be Chinese soldiers in Tibet being handed faux Tibetan Buddhist monks’ outfits in preparation for a staged riot for broadcast.” From [a blog called The Present Participle](#).**

reader, I first encountered this great poem in Jameson's "Postmodernism" essay, in which "China" plays a central illustrative role. According to Jameson, Perelman, strolling through a Chinatown, "came across a book of photographs whose idiogrammatic captions remained a dead letter to him . . . . The sentences of the poem in question are then Perelman's own captions to those pictures, their referents another image, another absent text; and the unity of the poem is no longer to be found within its language but outside itself, in the bound unity of another, absent book." (And may I note, too, that "China" has led me to Perelman's anthology, *Ten to One*, of which I am an admirer.)

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